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Haitian Rice Farmers Double Their Yields

Leo Andres Pablo Julson lost his mother at the age of 10, an event that marked him deeply. He was forced to quit school shortly after her death to help his father in the fields and remembers working long hours by his side. Their hard work did not pay off as they would have liked in rural Haiti—life as a farmer was difficult and their agricultural production remained low.

Today, as a rice farmer, Julson has seen a dramatic improvement in his family's way of life. Thanks to a USAID-funded project, Feed the Future West, Julson is now a self-confident farmer filled with hope for the future. Feed the Future West is a five-year project in Haiti that started under the U.S. Government's flagship global hunger and food security initiative, Feed the Future.

Before the arrival of the Feed the Future West project, Julson was one of many farmers whose rice yields barely reached 2 tons per hectare. But after using the System of Rice Intensification (SRI), a method of rice cultivation that has been adopted in 40 countries, Julson's yields more than doubled. The method allows farmers to double their yields while using fewer seeds and significantly less water and fertilizers. The principles of SRI include good soil preparation, adequate space between plants, using one seed per pocket, intermittent irrigation, weeding between rows, and organic fertilizer. This results in strong roots and vigorous plants that engender high yields.

"I would have never imagined that it was possible for me to harvest 5 to 6 tons of rice on one single hectare of land—it's such an extraordinary feat for me," said Julson.

Since 2011, this increase in yields has generated revenues of more than $1,000 each planting season—double what Julson made in previous seasons.

"My family's living condition has greatly improved, and now I can hope for a better future for my son, including allowing him to have a good quality education. I have also been able to acquire a motorcycle, which has made life easier for my family and allows me to transport produce more easily," said Julson, who sells the rice locally.

As a certified master farmer and member of the Federation for the Development of the Thomazeau Plain, a farmers' association, Julson is working hard to promote the SRI technique among farmers in his community.

"This experience has proven to me that we farmers can once again believe in agriculture and that we are also capable of helping improve the environment in the country," he said.

The SRI method was first introduced by the Feed the Future West project in 2010 in selected areas, including the Cul-de-Sac plain where Julson lives. The project prepared demonstration plots to illustrate to farmers the superior results of SRI. With a traditional rice plot planted next to one using the new SRI technique, farmers were able to witness firsthand the difference in yields produced. The Feed the Future West project worked with about 1,500 farmers using SRI. For rice farmers alone, the gross margin per hectare increased from $350 to $1,691.

For the rice farmers in Feed the Future West's intervention areas, this difference represents the potential for a better future and improved way of life. With the work of successful farmers like Julson who are helping to promote the techniques within their communities, farmers will continue to see improved futures and living conditions, even after the Feed the Future West project ends in May 2014.

Farmers benefiting from the Feed the Future West project have seen yields increase in other areas as well. From 2009 until 2013, corn yields increased 448 percent, bean yields increased 94 percent, and plantain yields by 56 percent.

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